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FM AMEMBASSY LA PAZ
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4350
INFO RUEHAC/AMEMBASSY ASUNCION 6934
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 4282
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 8170
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 5415
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 2645
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 2805
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 3538
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 4727
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 5276
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 9883
RUMIAAA/USCINCSO MIAMI FL
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SUBJECT: LIMITING DISCOURSE: AN AUTHORITARIAN BENT IN THE
GOB'S LATEST DECREE

REF: LA PAZ 1537

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On June 20, 2007 the Government of Bolivia issued Supreme Decree 29174, which expands the coverage of telecommunication technologies in rural parts of Bolivia. The decree also includes articles affecting community-based radio stations. While government-funded communitarian-stations will continue to broadcast overtly political content unaffected, independent stations are beginning to feel the noose tighten. Critics warn that the GOB could use it as a tool to limit freedom of expression. Vague programming guidelines and new licensing requirements open the door to unilateral government closures based on political decisions similar to the closure of RCTV in Venezuela. Given President Evo Morales' earlier pronunciations and authoritarian tendencies, fears of this type may not be ill-founded (reftel). End Summary.

Expanding Access

¶2. (SBU) President Evo Morales approved Supreme Decree 29174 on June 20th, subsequently presented to the public on June 26. The decree expands access to telecommunication technologies in the rural parts of Bolivia, which have historically lacked access because of their isolation. Vice Minister of Telecommunications Roy Roque explained that "the decree looks to expand the communications network in the countryside of which only .6% is currently covered" (informal translation). The GOB has set about increasing that coverage to 80% by 2010. In a country with low print media circulation, poor television coverage, and even worse internet access, radio broadcast is by a large margin the principle source of information for most Bolivians.

Restrictions on Community Radio Stations

¶3. (SBU) The decree includes many articles that negatively impact community-based radio stations. It bans legislative and judicial authorities, as well as other public functionaries, from owning either whole or part of a radio station. More importantly, political party representatives or

union leaders are also banned from owning community stations.

The decree prohibits anyone "that exercises control, direction, or administration in another station" from obtaining a community station license, the implications of which are to limit the influence of individual owners. It also limits the broadcasting radius of these stations to only one municipality.

¶4. (SBU) The decree prohibits stations from airing political messages of any nature and limits them to only cultural and educational programming. According to the decree, programming should be directed towards strengthening local culture and promoting indigenous languages. Any station that fails to do so will have its license revoked. The decree does not define the difference between a cultural or political message.

¶5. (SBU) Significantly, the decree does not affect the 30 radio stations inaugurated by Morales' government with Venezuelan funding, because their programming ostensibly contains only educational and cultural content, according to the GOB. This is disingenuous because these stations rebroadcast blatantly political, pro-MAS content from Radio Patria Nuevo, the state owned radio station. By categorically defining these stations as exempt from the new decree while tightening the noose around independent stations, the GOB is restricting full access to the airwaves to broadcasters known to promote its message.

Reactions to the Decree

¶6. (SBU) NGO's and broadcasters alike are critical of the new decree. The Association of Bolivian Radio Broadcasters (ASBORA) held a series of meetings July 6-7, where representatives expressed concerns that the new regulations would make their operations unprofitable. The operators claim that the new regulations would inhibit their ability to spread cost by broadcasting in multiple markets.

¶7. (SBU) Operators are also concerned that the new licensing procedures restrict the decision making process to only the Ministry of Public Works and the Vice Minister of Telecommunications. Since the GOB can decide what is cultural and what is political, critics argue that broadcasters will be vulnerable to politically motivated attacks. The government has dubbed the decree as part of "the democratization of media outlets," seemingly indifferent to the rights of broadcasters. The reality is that fewer stations will likely be available to listeners since single municipality stations are generally unprofitable.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) President Evo Morales uses indigenismo (the promotion of indigenous cultures) as a political tool, thus blurring the line between cultural and political messages. The decree's provisions resemble the Venezuelan regulations that enabled President Hugo Chavez to unilaterally close RCTV. While it is apparently OK for President Morales to mix cultural and political messages, it seems his government will not be so forgiving when it comes to granting or revoking licenses of community radio stations.

¶9. (SBU) Decree 29174 can be seen as part of President Morales' pattern of hostility towards the media, e.g. as expressed at the 5th World Encounter of Leftist Intellectuals, May 22-25 (reftel). At the conference, he characterized media outlets as the principle sources of resistance to change and signed an agreement with the Venezuelan and Cuban governments establishing an observer organization to monitor "hegemonic interests" in the media.
End Comment.
GOLDBERG